DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 123 665 CS 501 369

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TITLE Communication, Systems, and Conflict.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 31p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (Philadelphia, March 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$2.06 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); *Conflict; Conflict Resolution; *Human Development; *Human Relations; Information Systems; *Information Theory; *Interaction Process Analysis; Problem Solving; Social Change; Social Development; Social Systems
IDENTIFIERS *Conflict Management

ABSTRACT

Both popular and academic perceptions of conflict have been historically negative. Conflict, however, or the discrepancy between the demands of the environment and the demands of a living system, is common to individuals, groups, organizations and societies, and is part of the communication process by which living things interact with their environment. Assessments of the nature of conflict are subject to the variation in evaluative criteria selected and the time frame considered. By definition, however, conflict is functional and necessary to the adaptation of life. The communications system perspective can provide an alternative unit of analysis, "system+ environment," which attempts to synthesize a cross-contextual, cross-level, communication-conflict paradigm and has implications for interactions from the international to the personal level. (KS)

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Communication, Systems, and Conflict

Brent D. Ruben

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Presented at the Annual Conference of the Eastern Communication Association, Philadelphia, March, 1976

CS 501 369

Communication, Systems, and Conflict

The quest for an unambiguous conceptualization of conflict seems, at this point in time, as problematic as the search for an integrated view of communication; efforts to consider the relationship between conflict and communication seem plagued at nearly every turn by the lack of clarity of both terms.

This similar fate is probably other than coincidental. Both terms have an interdisciplinary heritage, and both have been used in a popular, non-academic, sense as long as they have been foci for systematic investigation. Perhaps because of this, communication and conflict have been more often discussed at an operational level than a conceptual one, and for each, more effort seems to be devoted to deciding "what to do about it" and "how best to do it" than to determining "what it is" and "how it functions."

With a concern for improved international relations, intra-university dynamics, employer-employee relations, group functioning, family dynamics, human relations, psychological well-being, and so on, laymen, professionals, and academicians of various persuasions have sought, each in their own fashion, to better understand problems of conflict and their solution. For those in our field, the opportunity to explore the role of communication in conflict and conflict resolution, has provided a potential for "real-world" relevance, and in that there seems to be a strong appeal. Perhaps for this reason alone, the exploration of the communication-conflict paradigm has been termed one of the most significant and rewarding of the decade.[1]

But there are trade-offs. It seems that a focus on problems of conflict

and their resolution has, thusfar, not contributed significantly to improving the conceptualization of the communication-conflict relationship, and in fact, may have had the opposite consequence. And as study and application of the communication conflict paradigm become increasingly attractive to communication scholars and professionals, the consequence of early, unanswered questions, unconsidered alternatives, and unresolved ambiguities will become increasingly problematical.

What is conflict? How shall its presence be determined? What is not conflict? What is the nature of the relationship between communication and conflict? What is communication?

To what extent is conflict bad? To what extent is conflict avoidable and to be avoided? Is conflict an interpersonal variable? To what extent are the necessary and sufficient conditions for conflict external to the individual?

What is the conceptual relationship of conflict to competition, suspicion, cooperation, aggression, negotiation, agitation, commitment, threat, trust, promises, compromise, winning and losing, and hostility? What is the role of persuasion, speech, rhetoric, gaming, and influence in the communication-conflict paradigm?

It would, of course, be naive to suppose that providing answers to each of these questions, resolution to the ambiguities, or a comprehensive statement of alternatives is possible in one or several papers such as this. A more modest and hopefully more realistic goal would be simply to document the contention that there are still some important questions to be answered--and asked--and to indicate some ambiguities regarding the nature of conflict, the nature of communication, and the operational and conceptual relationship between the two. A second intention of this paper will be to suggest that

one viable, yet unexplored, alternative perspective on communication and conflict is afforded by a communication systems paradigm, and to explore, briefly, the implications of such a framework to matters of present interest.

The Nature of Conflict

To note that conflict has become a household word is to restate the obvious. Perhaps destined to replace "relevance" or "relationship" in frequency of use--if not valence--one finds the term conflict used everywhere about us. As reflected in mass media fare and social discourse, conflict means to fight, battle, struggle, compete with, contradict, oppose, be antagonistic toward or incompatible with. Used as a noun, conflict may refer to hostility, a hassle, fight, battle, struggle, sharp disagreement, misunderstanding, opposition, breakdown in communication, emotional disturbance, etc.

Academic notions of conflict provided in contemporary discussion of the communication-conflict relationship, though more rigorous, seem generally to parallel the popular sense of the term. Conflict is seen as a struggle to gain a desired value and to neutralize, injure, or eliminate rivals;[2] a contradiction between alternatives offered or imposed;[3] incompatibility of interest between two or more persons giving rise to struggles between them;[4] and an incompatibility of goals and responses.[5]

Conflict has also been viewed as the expression of a struggle or incompatibility in the distribution of limited resources;[6] perceived disagreement regarding equally attractive and/or mutually exclusive alternatives;[7] disagreement or misunderstanding,[8] competition for scarce social resources;[9] competition;[10] a context in which participants are trying

to "win";[11] and behavior that seriously disrupts a situation and makes groups dysfunctional or threatens their continued existence.[12]

Not surprisingly, a simple review of major definitions of conflict falls short of providing a clear answer to the question, what is conflict? While the notions of conflict presented in the foregoing do not provide a singular sense of how one should understand the concept, they do serve some important functions: 1) they suggest the range of views of conflict present in contemporary literature and popular discourse, 2) they indicate areas where various concepts of conflict converge, and those where ambiguity and divergence are present, and 3) they indicate the dimensions in terms of which conflict is typically characterized. In so doing they raise some questions which require consideration: Is conflict bad? Can and should conflict be avoided? Is conflict a dyadic phenomenon? To what extent is conflict situation-specific? Are the necessary and sufficient conditions for conflict external to the individual?

Is conflict bad?

From Olivia Newton-John[13] who urges us to avoid disagreement and strive to be mellow, to friends who indicate displeasure at being "ha sled," to media reports of the Vietnam "conflict," and outbreaks of violence, conflict and death, to scholars who caution the "the seeds of conflict are eternally present and may lead to drastic personal or collective consequences," one may easily be led to conclude that conflict is bad--usually (if not always) and mostly (if not totally).[14]

While it has been suggested in the literature on a number of occasions that conflict ought not, solely, be regarded as a negative phenomenon;[15]

this point of view seems to have had minimal impact.

As Schelling notes:

> Among diverse theories of conflict...a main dividing line is between those that treat conflict as a pathological state and seek its causes and treatment, and those that take conflict for granted and study the behavior associated with it.[16]

While there are, for example, some basic texts that consider conflict and its relationship to communication in both negative and positive terms,[17] others emphasize only the negative nature presumed to be characteristic of conflict.[18]

In a great many discussions--both popular and academic--one notes that the rhetoric of conflict is composed essentially of negative terms. Conflict is characterized as "a struggle," "a fight," "an incompatibility," or "a disagreement" which takes place between "antagonists," "rivals," or "opponents." A sense that conflict is negative, may also result from direct statements of valence, lack of balance, and omission. Consider a statement such as: "The seeds of conflict are eternally present; and in many cases failure to deal successfully with conflict results in drastic personal or collective consequences,"[19] or "Ultimately, conflict will seriously endanger--even destroy group process and any possibility of its success."[20] Both statements may well be valid and neither precludes the possibility that conflict may be positive in some instances, but in the absence of rhetorical counterpoint, such statements certainly do auger for a conceptualization of conflict in primarily negative terms, if only by default.

Is conflict avoidable? Should it be avoided?

Closely related to lines of reasoning suggested in the preceding discussion, one may ask whether conflict is avoidable? And, should it be

avoided? Basic definitions of conflict seem to suggest somewhat contradictory positions in this regard. Viewed as an incompatibility of interest between two or more persons which result in struggles between them,[21] a contradiction between alternatives offered or imposed,[22] or an incompatibility of goals and responses,[23] one may decide that conflict cannot be avoided; whether it should be is apparently not addressed by these definitions.

Definitions such as a struggle to gain a desired value and to neutralize, injure, or eliminate rivals,[24] may be understood to suggest that conflict could be avoided. And, to the extent that neutralization, injury, or elimination of rivals is viewed in negative terms, the implication that they should be avoided, may also be inferred from the definition.

A third sort of definitional category is suggested by a view of conflict as disagreement or misunderstanding,[25] or behavior that seriously disrupts a situation and makes groups dysfunctional or threatens their continued existence.[26] Both seem to suggest that conflict should be avoided, to the extent that misunderstanding and disagreement are negatively regarded; neither definition has clear implication as to whether this is possible or not. The authors suggest elsewhere in their writings that conflicts may be productively managed. Clearly these are not three mutually exclusive types, a point made clear by examination of several of the other definitions which may fall into none or more than one of the categories suggested.

Still, in general, a consequent of the notion that conflict is bad, would seem to be the suggestion that it could and should be avoided.[27] That there is a journal of conflict resolution (and not one on conflict generation), or numerous books and articles devoted to the role of communication in conflict resolution (and far fewer centered on communicatcn

and conflict generation)[28] seems to provide some subtle evidence that conflict is understood as something that can--and should--be avoided as possible. In a discussion of this viewpoint, Simons provides a discussion of what he terms an anti-conflict bias:

> Despite evidence that conflicts--even violent conflicts may be "healthy" for mankind, many rhetoricians...have focused exclusively on how conflicts could be prevented, resolved or managed, and not how they could be incited, exacerbated or maintained.

The concern for prevention, resolution, and management, to which Simons alludes, is evidenced in many contemporary treatments of conflict in communication texts.[30] Generally, strategic and tactical approaches suggest that one can identify when conflict is present, and through knowledge or training, learn to avoid, manage, or resolve it to advantage.

Is conflict uniquely human?

Of the definitions of conflict reviewed earlier in this paper, only two seem to preclude considerations of conflict phenomena in animals other than humans. To suggest that conflict is an incompatibility of interest between two or more persons giving rise to struggles between them[31] or a disagreement or misunderstanding[32] is to limit ones framework to the human domain.

While few definitions seem to preclude exploration of conflict behavior in animals other than humans, discussions of the phenomenon and its relationship to communication seem to categorically exclude such considerations. There are various possible explanations for this. Perhaps potential parallels between human and other animal behaviors that might be termed "conflict" have been considered and determined to be less than useful, analytically. Perhaps there is no conflict among animals other than humans. Or, perhaps the issue has not been considered. Whatever the

reasons--by definition--probably more often by default--animal behavior is simply not considered in explorations of communication and conflict.

Definitions of conflict as struggles between persons, incompatibilities of interest between persons, or competition for scarce resources between persons exclude consideration of isomorphic or analogical phenomena in other animals, by definition. So too, in an even more direct fashion by indicating that "by definition, conflict involves two or more people."[33]

Given most definitions of conflict however, one would conclude that the phenomenon does occur among animals other than human.[34] The utility and relevance of comparisons between the two realms for advancement of the communication-conflict paradigm are yet to be explored from the communication perspective; such exploration is probably essential.

Is conflict an interpersonal phenomenon?

If conflict is an incompatibility of interests between two or more persons giving rise to struggles between them,[35] a struggle to gain a desired value and neutralize, injure, or eliminate rivals,[36] or behavior that disrupts a situation and makes groups dysfunctional,[37] then it would seem a minimum of two participating, individuals are a necessary condition for the phenomenon. A number of scholars seem to agree with this position.[38]

Other authors provide a definition of conflict which does not seem to require the presence of two or more persons.[39] Some writers provide a separate discussion of intrapersonal conflict.[40]

Whether and how intrapersonal and interpersonal views of conflict can be brought together is an important question. One may well ask whether interpersonal notions of conflict are a subset of intrapersonal phenomena--or vice versa. Can intrapersonal studies of cognitive inconsistency which

are suggestive of a monadic view of conflict, be synthesized with traditional conceptions of conflict as a social phenomenon. For those interested in the development of an integrated communication-conflict paradigm these questions will be crucial.

To what extent is conflict situation specific?

While most definitions of conflict are not context specific, many of the discussions in which they are embedded seem to be. Perhaps as a consequence of the research designs, methodologies or contexts of application, discussion of problems of conflict and their solution seem often to suggest situation-specific postures.[41] Examinations of communication and conflict may focus on conflict in groups, or conflict in zero-sum games, or conflict in the university, or conflicts between employer and employee, or conflicts between nations, etc. And, while presumably such cases are selected because of their operational utility and empirical potential, in a number of instances the superordinate goal of improved understanding of the conflict-communication relationship becomes obscured.

Related, is the problem of suggesting that conflict at an international level can be disastrous, while later in the discussion or elsewhere in one's manuscript, indicating that intrapersonal conflict can lead to personal growth, relational elaboration, and creative thinking. To so suggest is probably to imply a lack of functional relationship of communication and conflict processes at various levels of human organization, without ever considering the question directly.

One may simply question, in this regard, whether maximum effort is being made to explore the extent to which it is possible to develop a communication-conflict paradigm which can be useful as an analytic tool in particular

contexts, and is capable of providing an integrated, cross-situation, cross-level, cross-context perspective, at the same instance.

To what extent are the necessary and sufficient conditions for conflict external to the individual(s)?

Considering various discussions of conflict, one wonders to what extent both necessary and sufficient conditions for conflict reside in the reality external to the individual or individuals involved.[42] To suggest that conflict is defined by scarce resources, incompatibility, disagreement, or competition may be to imply that each and every occurrence of such conditions is to be regarded as conflict. One may well question the extent to which disagreement or competition or misunderstanding must be perceived, acknowledged, or expressed in order to qualify the occurrence as an instance of conflict?

To what extent are incompatibilities, disagreements, or scarce resources are given in a particular configuration in objective reality, apart from the understandings of the participants, or the observer, scholar, or researcher?

The Nature of Communication

To a large extent, the kind of answers one requires to the questions raised in the preceding discussion, will depend on how one thinks about the nature of communication and its relation to conflict. One such characterization--which seems reasonably pervasive is suggested by the following excerpt:

> I believe in universal disarmament, the elimination of all guns. Guns are an indication that there has been a breakdown in communication. They are the end result of failure to communicate.[43]

As would seem to be suggested in the case above, the presence of conflict is often presumed to be a consequence of (or at least evidence for) a stoppage, breakdown, error, or deterioration of communication.[44] Such a view seems to undergird a view of conflict as disagreement or misunderstanding.[45]

Reflective of this posture is the consequent notion that communication is the best treatment for conflict.[46] The essence of this position may well be embodied in the humorous comment: "Different communication strokes for different conflictful folks."[47] This posture is suggested also by Greenwood, who notes that "argumentation and bargaining are assumed always to be of value in conflict resolution, and may help to explain why Greenwood notes with apparent surprise "that negative results have resulted in some studies of bargaining comparing the presence and absence of the opportunity to communicate" (underscoring added).[48] Greenwood notes also that "communication actually led to lower levels of cooperation" in some studies (underscoring added).[49]

One may well ask exactly what is meant by communication, and, depending upon what is referenced by the term, why one might expect the presence of communication to lead more predictably to the lessening of conflict, than to its maintenance, or exacerbation.

A view of communication as "purposeful, message-sending" defined in terms of "threats," "promises," "debate," "bargaining," and "negotiation" seems to undergird most characterizations of the communication-conflict relationship. The prototype of this view of the communication-conflict paradigm is suggested by Bowers in his presentation of the Archer-Target metaphor.[50] Conflict-producing communication was thought to be brought

about by purposeful, archer-initiated, arrow-sending, target-directed behavior, suggesting that the Archer's (sender's) arrows carried threats and promises (messages) to the Target (receiver) with the effect of defining a state of conflict. In a latter discussion of the paradigm, Bowers notes at least one respect in which he believes his paradigm to be inadequate.[51] It fails to explain why in many instances Targets respond as if they were struck by Arrows when none, in fact, were shot. That is, persons may, and do in many instances, react as if they have received threatening messages from another person, when in fact, no verbal, nor purposive, nor target-directed message has been sent.[52]

The implications of such a finding would seem to raise a number of questions about the appropriateness of defining communication only in terms of sender-originated, purposeful, receiver-directed, message-sending.

Such a finding is consistent with the conclusion of a number of others who have suggested the need to consider communication in other than uni-directional, Sender→Message→Channel→Receiver = Effects terms.[53]

Rather than regarding communication essentially as the study and utilization of the dynamics of purposeful, message-sending, communication can be defined as the study of message-related behavior. Such a view would focus less on how messages are constructed and how, where, and with what effect they flow, and more upon the functions messages and networks serve.[54] As those who study communication behavior among bees have been concerned with the non-verbal language structure of the waggle dance and run, with the goal of identifying the message-related functions the behavior serves,[55] might not human communication scholars usefully focus their attention on verbal and non-verbal codes, media--and conflict-- similarly, in terms of the informational-behavioral functions served?

Communication and Systems

Among those approaches to viewing communication in functional terms are general semantics, sociology of knowledge, symbolic interactionism, and general systems theory. The framework which will be briefly summarized in the following paragraphs draws selectively from each, resulting in a posture which, for convenience, will be termed a communication systems paradigm.[56] The paradigm is built upon a series of empirically-derived propositions about living things which suggest a particular view of communication and the communication-conflict relationship.

The Nature of Living Systems: Basic Propositions

1. People, like other plants and animals, are instances of living systems.[57]
2. Living systems are structural and functional units (individual and social) which maintain themselves (and grow, change, and deteriorate) only through interactions with their environment.[58]
3. Interactions are of two types: a) transactions of matter-energy, which may be termed physiological metabolism; b) transactions of data-information, which may be termed communication or informational metabolism.
4. Exchanges are transactional phenomena.
5. The primary goal of all behavior of all living systems is adaptation.
6. All individuals (people and animals) behave as they do--both physiologically and communicationally--with the goal of adaptation with the environment.
7. All individuals (people and animals) are always striving to adapt with their environment as best they can.

Without elaborating upon these propositions, we may briefly indicate some of the implications of the systematic perspective for human behavior in general, and communication in specific.

The Nature of Communication: Basic Propositions

1. Communication is one of two essential life processes of all living things.

2. Communication is continual: For living things, there are no "breakdowns in communication;" there is no option not to be in communication with the environment.

3. Human communication is a special instance of communication.

4. Human communication is transactional.

Communication Systems and Conflict

Given this framework, conflict may be defined as a discrepancy between the demands and capacities of an environment and the demands and capacities of a living system. Given such a view, conflict is understood to be a natural and inevitable aspect of the physiological and informational exchange processes of all living things. The capacity of a living system to be in communication with its environment is a necessary precondition for all life, and hence for conflict--its maintenance, its resolution, or its exacerbation.

The conditions which give rise to conflict are given by the nature of living systems, which must strive to adapt to and fit with their environment. Thus, conflict and adaptation are inseparable concepts. In living systems, the presence of one implies the potential for the other.[59]

It must be said, therefore, that the essence of any living system is defined as much by conflict as by harmony, as much by dissociative as associative action; as much its struggles as by its accomplishments.

In this connection, it may be useful to note the following excerpt from Simmel, which is germane not only to the individual, but to all living systems:

> The individual does not attain the unity of his personality exclusively by an exhaustive harmonization....on the contrary,

> contradiction and conflict not only precede this unity but are operative in every moment of its existence.[60]

As a means of further exploring the implication of a systems perspective on the communication-conflict relationship, it may be useful to reconsider the questions as to the nature of conflict that were posed earlier in this paper.

Is conflict bad?

The question may well be unanswerable and efforts to find the answer could be inappropriate and dysfunctional. Whether conflict is bad or good is certainly not specifiable in any singular, across-the-board fashion.

For the individual, in terms of affect, the experiencing of conflict is generally displeasing. It is the phenomenon which results in much stress, frustration, ambiguity, strife, strain, unhappiness, and grief. That this is so, has led to views of the sort expressed by Deutsch:

> ...conflict clearly has destructive consequences if the participants in it are dissatisfied with the outcomes. Similarly a conflict has productive consequences if participants feel they have gained.[61]

And, certainly there are times when conflict leads to feelings of accomplishment, happiness and satisfaction.

But to suggest that affect--how conflict feels--is an appropriate criterion for determining whether conflict is good or bad, functional or dysfunctional, to be avoided or not, is clearly not consistent with a systems perspective on the communication-conflict paradigm. The likelihood of accurately predicting the adaptive utilities of conflict for a system--or subsequent alterations in the system-environment relationship--from a knowledge of how a given individual feels at a particular moment is highly unlikely and, such attempts may be both misleading and dysfunctional.

A sense of that difficulty, and the contradiction that may be involved, is well suggested in the following quote from Simmel:

> Conflict is thus...a way of achieving some kind of unity....This is roughly parallel to the fact that it is the most violent symptom of a disease which represents the effort of the organism to free itself of disturbances and damages caused by them.[62]

As much as conflict is associated with stress and pain, so must it be viewed as sine qua non of learning, creativity, and biological and psychological growth and differentiation for the individual. And as social conflict may be a precondition for war, tyranny, and political strife, so must it be considered the life blood of social change, dissent, choice, and social evolution.

From a systems perspective, one is led to the view that the determination as to whether conflict is good or bad, functional or dysfunctional, useful or not must be made not in terms of affect, but rather in terms of the extent to which conflict serves the system's (individual or social) adaptive ends vis a vis its environment. It is probable that a great many instances of conflict which are judged to be dysfunctional because they are uncomfortable in the short run, would be judged profitable and of adaptive utility over a longer period of analysis.

Is conflict avoidable? Should it be avoided?

For living systems, conflict is no more avoidable than communication. Its presence is a characteristic of a living, vital system--whether individual or social. Conflict, and a system's efforts to strive for its resolve, is the essence of the adaptation process. It is essential to change, and a systems only defense against stagnation, detachment, entropy, and eventual extinction.

> Every living creature is an "open system" maintaining its form against the constantly threatening tendency to entropic disintegration. The living creature has to wage an uphill struggle. There are always problems to solve; successful individuals and species solve the problems characteristic to each.[63]

Is conflict uniquely human?

It should be clear from the foregoing that conflict is not to be regarded as a uniquely human phenomenon.[64] Rather, by definition, it is conceived to be a characteristic of the dynamic exchange processes that occur between all living systems and their environments.

While there are unique complexities of human symbolic communication processes that merit special consideration, the basic functions served by communication and conflict are analogous among all living things. Biological diversity, natural selection, and evolution can be regarded as outcomes of physiological and informational conflict interaction processes. It would seem that the development of a communication-conflict paradigm without regard to such considerations would be wasteful and perhaps invalid.[65] Clearly, the recognition that human conflict is in many respects a subset of conflict in living systems in general, provides a more comprehensive perspective in terms of which to think about conflict and communication. Additionally, it affords another, potentially fruitful, research domain from which to draw in efforts to understand the conflict-communication relationship in humans.

Is conflict an interpersonal phenomenon? To what extent is conflict situation specific?

Defining conflict in terms of discrepancies between the demands and capacities of an environment, and the requirements and outputs of a living system, suggests a system-environement

specific, unit of analysis. Here, a system might be an individual, a friendship, group, organization, society, or culture. As used in this definition, the phrase "demands and capacities of the environment," includes the totality of physical, situational, contextual, individual, social, group organization, societal, cultural, etc. factors and forces which at a particular point in time, impinge upon the system in question.

Accordingly, the presence of conflict does not imply--nor preclude--the presence of two persons. Interpersonal conflict would, therefore, be viewed as a special instance of the basic system-environment unit.

Presumably, such a view of conflict allows for cross-level, cross-contextual validity and utility. While the system under consideration and specific environmental demands would change from one analytic frame to the next, and over time, the sense of what conflict is and how it relates to communication would not.

To what extent are the necessary and sufficient conditions for conflict external to the individual?

It is probable that no two individuals would completely agree as the demands or capacities of an environment, at any one point in time. In part this would be a consequence of a realization that their environments are, in fact, different from one another, at least in terms of the two of them. Additionally, what constitutes an environmental demand or capacity for one system--group, society, or person--may not for another, or may, but to a lesser degree. So while there may be instances where it will be useful to regard the environment as constant across a number of systems--individuals or social--it is probable that in most instances the nature of a system and the demands and capacities of the environment taken together, will be the lowest possible unit of analysis

suggested by the systems paradigm. The necessary and sufficient conditions for conflict should therefore be understood to be given not in the environment, nor the system, but rather in the functional relationship between the two.

Summary and Implications

In the preceding section, communication has been discussed as one of two processes by which living things interact with their environment. Conflict was defined as a discrepancy between the demands and capacities of environment and the demands and capacities of a living system. Both were suggested to be characteristic of all living systems--individuals, groups, organizations, societies.

It has been argued that for living things, conflict is a natural process underlying the striving of a system to adapt with its environment. Thusly viewed, any living system is defined as much through conflict as harmony, as much by dissociative as associative action, as much by its struggles as by its accomplishments.

In general then, it may be said that conflict is, by definition, "good" or "functional," in that it is necessary to adaptation and essential to life. Determining whether a particular instance of conflict is good or bad--functional or dysfunctional--may be impossible--and is, at the least, an extremely difficult and complex task. Such assessments will depend upon: 1) the evaluative criterion selected (e.g. affect or adaptive utility and; 2) the time frame selected for analysis. If one selects the criterion of adaptive utility, as encouraged in earlier discussion, the problem of determining an appropriate point in time to make such judgments remains. Should consequences be measured in intervals of an hour? a week? a year? a decade? a lifetime? Several generations? Or, several

thousand years? Further are questions as to how particular consequences of conflict may be identified and how they may be causually or correlationally related to this or that instance of antecedent conflict?

That neither conflict nor communication are totally unique in structure or function to man, has also been an implication of previous discussion, as has been the suggestion that scholars interested in the studying of communication and conflict in humans might profit from consideration of these phenomena among other animals.

More generic research efforts should illuminate a number of useful similarities, and will also highlight some important differences that are reflective of human symbolization processes. And it is likely that this recognition will lead to some important issues. To the extent that humans know their environment, and their experiences in it, only through socially-provided and individually-mediated symbol systems, one may well ask what information value it is to know that someone believes they have been witness to or participant in conflict. Is that information about conflict, about the person, about the society, about the label "conflict," what? Of what predictive value is such information? The larger question is: What is the nature of the relationship between conflict as identified, discussed and "known" by humans (and studied by social scientists), and conflict which is critical to processes of differentiation, natural selection, and biological and cultural evolution?

In this connection, studies of human communication and human conflict as distinguished from animal communication and conflict may inevitably focus on the behavioral dynamics of what might be termed para-conflict--which occurs when someone believes they, or a social unit of which they are a part,

are "in conflict." Study of the communication dynamics associated with para-conflict, with a goal of identifying antecedent and consequent conditions could prove quite valuable. An important and related area of study would focus particularly on the professional and scientific community, seeking to explain and predict those phenomena from a generic class of events, that would be labeled as studied as instances of conflict (e.g. competition, arms races, hostility, bargaining), and those that would not (e.g. creativity, learning, growth, group decision-making, social evolution).

In another section of the paper, it was noted that a useful unit of analysis for conflict is system + environment, and that intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, organization, societal or international conflict might be examined from such a perspective. Among the merits of such a scheme, it has been noted, is the possibility of developing, a cross-contextual, cross-level, communication-conflict paradigm. Additional questions to be faced by scholars who wish to pursue a systems approach to human communication and conflict regard the empirical assessment of the relationship between a system and its environment, and the determination of where necessary and sufficient conditions for conflict, and para-conflict, reside.

If both the "demands and capacities of the environment" and a "system's output and requirements" are multi-dimensional, and the relationship between dimensions for each often assymetrical (as with an individual who smokes because he's nervous), how can the complex matrix of interactions be conceptually or operationally unbundled? Further, in as much as systems are conceived to be composed of sub-systems (and sometimes subsubsystems), might not subsystems occasionally have adaptive ends which are contradictory to those of other subsystems, or to the larger system? Possible examples are labor and management in wage negotiations, or the wife who

wishes to break free from the family.

Explorations of these notions leads back to a number of basic issues which are both conceptual and methodological in nature, and as pertinent to a system's perspective as to other approaches to the study of conflict. Given than one has determined what conflict is, how to know precisely and reliably when a system is in conflict. Given that one accepts the importance of analyzing system + environment, how to identify and define the dema and capacities of an environment and a system. And given that one comes to recognize that the adaptive consequences of conflict may occur over-time, and may not correspond well to self-reported feelings of pleasure, or pain , how to assess these consequences.

Conclusion

It has been the goal of this paper to identify and review some unanswered questions and persistent ambiguities that are reflected in popular and academic discussions of conflict, communication, and the conceptual and operational relationship between the two. An additional goal has been to sketch some of the dimensions of a systems approach to the communication-conflict paradigm, and to explore several implications of such a view. With regard to this last goal, the intent has not been to offer the communication systems perspective as the solution to all problems associated with the study of communication and conflict. The systems perspective is an alternative. It provides some answers, poses some variant ways of thinking about the issues involved, leaves some ambiguities totally unresolved, and introduces a number of new questions. Whether any of the questions are better, or simply different, awaits determination.

* * *

It was suggested early in the paper, if only by implication, that those of us who now consider ourselves--or aspire to be--communication scholars, researchers, and teachers may easily be victimized by the apparent relevance of our subject matter. This seems especially so when it comes to areas such as the communication-conflict relationship, precisely because of the extreme importance widely attached to each.

Occasionally, it may be useful to remind ourselves that the seductive call to deal with "real world" phenomena and to improve human existence, ought to be heeded with trepidation. The temptation to focus on problems as named, and to strive for prediction and control of those phenomena presumed to be problematic, carries with it the risk of developing concepts and theories rooted primarily--if not solely--in what may be little more or less than widespread disaffection, dislike, short-sightedness, or lack of tolerance for ambiguity. An even worse thought is that our efforts to predict and control in such an instance might prove effective.

Precisely what alternatives are available, I am not at all certain.

Footnotes

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6. C. David Mortensen, "A Transactional Paradigm of Verbalized Social Conflict," in Perspectives on Communication in Social Conflict, Gerald R. Miller and Herbert W. Simons, eds., (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 93.

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9. Gerald R. Miller, "Epilogue," in Perspectives on Communication in Social Conflict, Gerald R. Miller and Herbert W. Simons, eds., (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 209.

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16. Schelling, Op. Cit. p. 3.

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23. Raven and Kruglanski, Op. Cit., p. 70.

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26. Burgoon, Heston and McCroskey, Op. Cit., p. 68.

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30. Goldhaber, Op. Cit.; Keltner, Op. Cit.; Applbaum, Bodaken, Sereno, Anatol, Op. Cit.; Miller and Steinberg, Op. Cit.

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41. Cf. Simons, (1974), Op. Cit. pp. 1-13.

42. Cf. Mortensen, Op. Cit. and Miller, (1974) Op. Cit.

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45. Wilmot, Op. Cit., pp. 98-99.

46. Marr, Op. Cit., and Deutsch, Op. Cit.

47. Miller, (1973) Op. Cit. p. xiv.

48. James G. Greenwood, "Opportunity to Communicate and Social Orientation in Imaginary-Reward Bargaining," Speech Monographs, Vol. 41, No. 1, March, (1974), p. 78.

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56. The communication systems paradigm summarized here is reflective of a range of works in general semantics especially: Alfred Korzybski, Science and Sanity, 3rd ed. (Lakeville, Conn.: The International Non-Aristotelian Library Publishing Company, 1948); Wendell Johnson, People in Quandaries, (New York: Harper, 1946); Richard W. Budd, "General Semantics: An Approach to Human Communication," in Approaches to Human Communication Op. Cit.; Lee Thayer, Communication: General Semantics Perspectives, (New York: Spartan, 1970).

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Blumer's perspective Op. Cit.on symbolic interaction has also been significant.

Contributions in General Systems Theory which are especially significant for these purposes are Ludwig von Bertalanffy, General System Theory, (New York: Braziller, 1968); C. West Churchman, The Systems Approach, (New York: Delacorte, 1968); Walter Buckley, Modern Systems Research for the Behavioral Scientist, (Chicago: Aldine, 1968); Walter Buckley, Sociology and Modern Systems Theory, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1967); Roy R. Grinker, Toward a Unified Theory of Behavior, (New York: Basic Books, 1956), James G. Miller, "Living Systems: Basic Concepts; Structures and Process; Cross-Level Hypotheses," Behavioral Science, Vol. 10, (1965); Lee Thayer, Communication and Communication Systems, Homewood, Ill,: Irwin, (1968); Lee Thayer, "Communication Sine Qua Non of the Behavioral Sciences," Vistas in Sciences D. L. Arm, ed., (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968); Ervin Laszlo, System, Structure, and Experience, (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1969); Ervin Laszlo, Introduction to Systems Philosophy, (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1972); Brent D. Ruben and John Y. Kim, General Systems Theory and Human Communication, (Rochelle Park, New Jersey: Hayden, 1975).

57. A system may be defined as:
1)"a set of elements which stand in interaction," Ludwig von Bertalanffy, "General Systems Theory," General Systems Vol. 1, 1956 and edited version in General Systems Theory and Human Communication, Ruben and Kim, (1975), Op. Cit., 2) "A set of components that work together for the overall objective of the whole." (Churchman, Op. Cit. p. 18) 3)"Parts in continued activity in relation to each other and to the whole...." (Grinker, Op. Cit., p. 370).

The term may be defined in a variety of ways. For additional discussion see Ruben, (1972) Op. Cit.; Hall and Fagen in Ruben and Kim (1975) Op. Cit., and Alfred Kuhn, "Social Organization," in Ruben and Kim (1975) Op. Cit.

58. Environment may be defined as:
1) the physical, spatial, temporal, and sometimes symbolic sets of conditions in which systems are embedded (Ruben, 1972, Op. Cit, p. 126); 2) the suprasystems minus the system itself, (Miller, Op. Cit. p. 218); 3) "...a set of conditions that are relevant, but not directly under the influence of a system, (Churchman, Op. Cit., p. 63).

59. Cf., Hilyard, Op. Cit.

60. Simmel, Op. Cit., p. 15.

61. Deutsch, Op. Cit., p. 10.

62. Simmel, Op. Cit., p. 13.

63. Shands, Op. Cit., p. 99.

64. Cf. Etkin, Social Behavior and Organization Among Vertebrates, Op. Cit, p. 2, 33.

"The reproductive capacity of any species is so high that the increase in population tends to outrun the available necessities such as food and shelter. In resulting competition some members of the species, being better endowed...survive and reproduce more than others... Through this process the pool of genes characteristic of the species tends to shift in the direction of greater adaptability..." p. 2.

65. Cf., J. W. S. Pringle, "On the Parallel Between Learning and Evolution," General Systems, Vol. 1, (1956) pp. 90-109, and R. W. Gerard, "A Biologist's View of Society," General Systems, Vol. 1, (1956), pp. 155-162.